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Company's generosity turns into unwelcomed infamy

The legacy of asbestos

By CAMELA ZARCONE, Telegraph Staff

Superfund Records Center

SITE: Johns-ManvilleBREAK: 13.3OTHER: 470007

Asbestos. Throughout the century, it's a word that's never been far from the news in Nashua.

Today, the number of local sites where asbestos has been uncovered stands at 148 in Hudson and 182 in Nashua, although those keeping track warn that the tally will likely keep growing.

Just this spring, the expansion of the Senior Activity Center's parking lot on Temple Street was abruptly stalled when city street department employees, excavating to install and upgrade utility lines, uncovered sheets of asbestos buried there. And two weeks ago, a Maine telecommunications company learned about Greater Nashua's problem firsthand when it was told that its cellular tower on Sullivan Road in Hudson could only be built after the company removed all the asbestos at the 53-acre site.

They're only two of the latest installments in a story that's spanned the century. Once asbestos was a word that meant good jobs for the people who worked at the city's Johns-Manville factory. It also meant free fill, back in the days before "wetland" became common zoning parlance, for locals trying to spruce up their swampy yards.

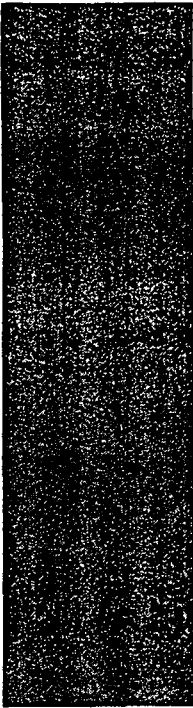
In Nashua publications, the word turned up in business directories such as the 1928 "Nashua's 75 Years of Progress." There, an entry for Johns-Manville extolled it as a "Nashua plant famous for its asbestos shingles, corrugated roofing and siding for industrial buildings," as well as a host of other products, among them "switchboards for hotels and steamship companies." Twenty years later, readers of The Telegraph saw the word regularly in ads presenting various installments of "One-Minute News About Johns-Manville Rock Wool."

Fast-forward to the past few decades, though, and the word begins showing up in more alarming contexts, next to loaded phrases like "cancer" and "Superfund." This marked the period when locals began remembering they had spent the better part of a century saturating the ground they walked on with asbestos.

Derived from a Greek word for "inextinguishable," asbestos is actually a broad term for a number of silicate minerals long employed in manufacturing to make products fireproof. When airborne, the fibers can find their way into the lungs, where their presence has been linked to cancer and other diseases.

But, as people like Stanley Alukonis would tell you, there are two kinds of asbestos.

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As a state representative since the '70s, Lefebvre has taken his campaign to dispel concerns about asbestos all the way to the Statehouse floor, where he said he has spoken out against what he characterizes as his colleagues' overblown alarm over asbestos found in schools. His own Nashua home, he points out, has its fair share of asbestos-based construction products inside, including some features he improvised from products that had been discarded at work.

"I even have some very nice polished shelves made from asbestos," he said.

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